

Characteristics of the British Victorian Era

As with any period of literature, the Victorian Era in Britain is difficult to define, especially since it lasted so long—roughly from 1830 to 1901. The period is named for Queen Victoria, who ruled from 1837 until her death in 1901. She remained Britain's longest reigning monarch until 9 September 2015 when she was surpassed by Queen Elizabeth II. The period may be subdivided into three categories:

Early-Victorian Period (1830-1848)

Mid-Victorian Period (1848-1870)

Late-Victorian Period (1870-1901)

Furthermore, the 1890s decade often is considered separately as a period of decadence that bridges the gap between Victorian writers and the twentieth century. As in the Romantic period, drama (from writers like Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw) remained popular; essays (from writers like John Stuart Mill, Thomas Carlyle, and John Ruskin) found broad audiences; and poetry (from writers like Lord Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, and the Brownings) also attracted many readers. The period is most known, however, for its novels, written by the likes of the Brontë sisters, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy. The novels emphasized realistic representation and usually were published serially first and then published as “triple-deckers.” Victorian writers were interested in many of the same ideas as their Romantic predecessors, but they emphasized different aspects of those ideas. Victorian literature can be characterized largely by the following features:

- A strong sense of earnestness and self-satisfaction.
- A strong sense of moral responsibility (“White Man’s Burden”)
- A desire to preserve domestic propriety, respectability, and decency (woman as “angel in the house”)
- Increasing anxiety over the rapid growth of cities.
- Worry over rapid advances in science and technology (railways, the telegraph, photography, *etc.*)
- Interest in aestheticism (art for art’s sake), especially in the 1890s.
- Concern about the growth of Britain’s empire (to cover fully one quarter of the earth’s surface).
- Anger over brutal working conditions for factory workers.
- Desire for reform of government, tax structures, working conditions, *etc.*
- Interest in the expansion of voting rights and employment opportunities for women and the poor.
- Interest in Utilitarianism (greatest good for the greatest number of people).
- Anxiety over challenges to traditional religious views (Darwin, evolution, survival of the fittest).
- Worry over the decreasing importance of humanity in long geological terms.
- Concern over social problems.
- Desire to instruct readers in proper conduct and morality.